

Women and Politics in the Media

A Review Article by

Heather McIntosh
University of Ottawa, Canada

Political Culture and Media Genre: Beyond the News

By Kay Richardson, Katy Parry, and John Corner
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 240 pp.
ISBN: 9781137291271.

Women Political Leaders and the Media

By Donatella Campus
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 160 pp.
ISBN: 9781137295545.

Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Political Culture

By Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson
College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2013. 242 pp.
ISBN: 9781603449830.

The media can be seen as a tool through which stories about the world are told. From education and news reporting to entertainment and advertising, the media disseminate messages to audiences that are packaged to tell a story. These narratives communicate overt and covert messages to media consumers that (re)present social, cultural, and political discourses that impact how audiences understand these systems. Media messages most commonly communicate information that is tailored to align with dominant ideologies, perpetuating the rhetoric of the status quo. This is not to say that all information communicated by the media is heterogeneous, as counter-intuitive discourse is also present. However, the pervasive dissemination of dominant ideologies persists as a concern among minority populations, as their voices are often subjugated and ignored within mainstream media. Coverage of women and politics demonstrates interlocking scrutiny, as issues pertaining to gender inequality recur in both politics and the media. The three books, *Political Culture and Media Genre: Beyond the News* (2013) by Kay Richardson, Katy Parry, and John Corner, *Women Political Leaders and the Media* (2013) by Donatella Campus, and *Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Political Culture* (2013) by

Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson, all discuss the ways in which political figures are covered in the media. Their exploration of the coverage of female political leaders is of specific importance, as they provide unique accounts of how this procedure occurs from differing perspectives. The ways in which these leaders are framed is integral to the discussions presented, demonstrating analyses guided my theories from disciplines such as leadership studies, women's studies, and communication studies. Despite varying perspectives, these books are deemed strong contributions to contemporary research on media depictions of female political figures and the role of media framing in this process. This review will discuss some of the themes presented in these books, which demonstrate the prevalence of stereotypical imagery and text when covering women involved in politics.

Although women's official induction into politics can be considered a positive social development, the media depictions of such females do not exist without controversy. Female political leaders, for example, face increased media scrutiny, which is attributed to the media's adherence to gender stereotypes that favour men over women in positions of power. More frequently than not, the designer of her clothing, her hairstyle of choice, and emotional demeanour tend to overshadow a female politician's formation of arguments, opinion on policies, and projections for future endeavours. For instance, research evidenced in *Women Political Leaders and the Media* (2013) by Donatella Campus shows that newspaper articles are more likely to comment on the outfits or haircuts of a female candidate than on a male one. Although male politicians are not exempted from such trivial mention, they face decreased coverage of such nature. Research on media framing of women in politics remains limited; this dearth is not only attributed to females' recent involvement in politics, but also the small number of women currently involved in this field.

As with many discussions pertaining to gender inequality, power relations emerge as an accurate point of departure in discussions pertaining to women in politics. In her book, Campus reduces women's lack of political leadership to a discussion on power and masculinity. Informed by gender studies and supported by leadership and management studies, Campus describes the primal roots of males' monopoly over positions of leadership. Being that leadership is associated with masculinity, it is assumed that the exertions of such power should be a male's prerogative. Campus explores these traditional assumptions of power, outlining the psychosexual connotations of power; when one thinks of power, the mind often travels to the masculine figure—strength, force, and authority over others. With this explanation, she poses the question: is power a male concept? While her provision of evidence is undoubtedly convincing, her historical account of power and gender is most didactic:

[H]istorically, the power of men has been public and visible, whereas when women had power, it was mostly covert and informal. This is particularly true for the field of politics and government, where until the past century women exerted their political influence only as a result of private relationships, whether as wives or mistresses. The only exception to the rule was a small group of reigning queens who inherited the crown in the absence of male heir.

(Campus, 2013: 11)

In this excerpt, Campus directs the discussion of women's limited role in the political sphere to a complex exploration of the gendering of bodies through binary oppositions. The construction of how society views males (i.e., dominant, assertive, leaders) and females (i.e., passive,

submissive, followers) lends itself to how the media frames images of women in positions of power. This framing is a tumultuous process because the depiction of women in the media for the purpose of, for example, news reporting, traditionally covers males predominantly as leaders in society. Thus, the presence of female figures in political leadership—although becoming increasingly frequent—is still, according to Campus, scrutinized heavily by the media in accordance to preconceived ideas pertaining to the gender hierarchy. Despite social trends in countries such as Canada and the United States that demonstrate a shift in gender inequality, the analyses revealed by all of the books reviewed show the current limitations faced by females who choose to compete in the political arena while under the close examination of the mass media. The often distorted portrayals of female political figures in the media can eclipse their skills and value, which ultimately becomes a detriment to their ability to compete with males in the same industry and with similar positions.

Due to the traditional understandings of gender stereotypes that associate males with power and females with passivity, Campus asserts that women who work in the political sphere benefit from distancing themselves from femininity. Female gender associations can work against a woman who is striving to gain serious merit in politics; therefore, avoiding behaviours and symbols that perpetuate ideas of femininity is common. Although some female politicians in recent times have experimented with expressions of femininity while in leadership roles, the “Iron Lady” convention prevails. Thus, in addition to the challenges women face in entering politics and gaining equal respect, Campus demonstrates the challenges that women politicians face when being covered by the media. As with much of her discussion on female politicians and the media, the theme of leadership and its associations with masculinity emerges.

The distortion of representation demonstrated in media coverage of females is interpreted by Campus in many manners; however, issues pertaining to visibility and accuracy of such media images are a common theme. Visibility “implies not only the quantity of the coverage but also how the press frames that coverage” (Campus, 2013: 39). Campus’ survey of research surrounding the visibility of women politicians in the media reveals that while women have become more visible in terms of the quantity of coverage than in the past, the framing of messages surrounding female political figures remains distorted. She explains a variety of instances in which the media has obsessed over seemingly irrelevant elements of female politicians’ actions. An assessment of gender equality in the coverage of politicians suggests that while women are being allocated increased media attention, debates surrounding discriminatory coverage of females remain. In Campus’ analysis of how the media treat female politicians, it becomes clear that there is no easy resolve. For instance, women who choose to embrace their femininity in leadership positions are often infantilized, objectified, or disrespected through media misrepresentations, while those who choose to assimilate to the masculine role are equally scrutinized for their harsh disposition. These dichotomous portrayals are created through framing techniques that reinforce gender stereotypes pertaining to female politicians.

Framing is a common theme throughout the three books included in this review. In *Political Culture and Media Genre: Beyond the News* (2013) by Kay Richardson, Katy Parry, and John Corner, framing emerges as a prominent theme throughout the book. While the authors do not focus only on the media framing of women in politics, they expand their scope, discussing issues pertaining to, for example, culture and public interest in relation to political affairs. Frame analysis and frame theory are common analytical tools in communication and media studies that allow for the investigation of the ways in which the media package ideas for audiences. According to the authors, while all media genres can be subject to this analytical tool, media

studies that focus on the depiction of politics can benefit. Although the duty of journalism is to provide audiences with truthful representations of reality, the authors discuss how the ownership of media outlets can impact framing. This can impact, for instance, the type of coverage dedicated to female politicians, the use of positive and negative vernacular about a politician or a political party, or the amount of coverage given to political events. Being that citizens tend to be reliant on media outlets for information pertaining to political events and politicians, such depictions can seriously impact how a public views a political leader or party.

As discussed in the three books, the sensationalization of political events and figures is a common trend seen in media framing. Sensationalization in the media can emphasize and over-emphasize certain elements of a story, motivating audiences to understand aspects of media narratives in an inflated manner. The sensationalization of news reporting can be detrimental to viewers' ability to accurately understand events. Coverage of political events is often vulnerable to this practice, as media outlets tend to frame political events in alignment with the ownership's political allegiance. Richardson, Perry, and Corner explore the existence of sensationalization in the media, adapting the idea of the "spectacle" to deconstruct this process, identifying the presence of the theatrical—and sometimes farcical—coverage of politics in mainstream media. The authors provide a reconnaissance of the various trends pertaining to the creation of spectacles in the media, outlining the role of framing in this process. Further,

Discussion on editing choices [can] also [lead] to evaluative comments about how such portrayals conform to an entertainment-based logic, characterized as a marked tendency towards sensationalism or overstated negativity to pull in more viewers, rather than privileging a more edifying or informative perspective.

(Richardson, Parry & Corner, 2013: 120)

Richardson, Perry, and Corner's discussion on the sensationalization of politics in the media is applied to that which is found in Campus' book as well as that which is provided in *Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Political Culture* (2013) by Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson. Campus' exploration of the creation of spectacle in the media focuses on the ways in which news reporting sensationalizes elements of female political figures. Drawing connections with how female movie and television stars are depicted in the media, she asserts that the coverage of females in politics permeates a sense of entertainment. Her body and appearance are capitalized on for critique and discussion, which can downplay her abilities as a political figure or leader. This fascination is seen constantly in the entertainment sector, as the media closely examine the physique of actresses—for example, obsessing over their weight and fashion choices. The obsession with women's bodies and appearance is seen across media genres, however, its role in the coverage of women in politics is considered detrimental for various reasons. This trend shifts the focus away from a woman's applicable skills and potential to insignificant themes that fail to take into account the nature and work of politics.

Sheeler's and Anderson's analysis of this topic take the media's fixation on female politicians' bodies to another level, exploring the "porning" of these figures. Hailing from the pornography genre, the term "pornification" refers to media images and texts that are hypersexual or sexually exploitive. In preparation for the discussion of this topic, the authors explain the presence of the sexualisation of political participants throughout history. Arriving at present day, Sheeler and Anderson utilize the 2008 presidential campaign in the United States to exemplify the use of pornographic discourse surrounding female political figures. Guided by

feminist theory, the authors conducted a critical analysis of a diverse array of media materials from the 2008 presidential campaign (e.g., comments of broadcast journalists, viral videos, campaign paraphernalia) to identify and examine media coverage of Sarah Palin and Hilary Clinton. Agency is a central focus of this discussion, as the objectification and sexualisation of women in the media can rob them of their power and place them in inferior positions to men. In their exploration of this process, the authors recognize and classify various instances in which coverage of Palin and Clinton was sexually exploitive, which is summarized here:

The pornification of Palin's identity reflects a power feminist/postfeminist assumption that women's most potent form of power is sexual and that sex appeal can and should be employed to gain other forms of power (personal, economic, political). Palin's case reveals the danger intrinsic to this ideology . . . Conversely, the pornification of Clinton's identity was an antifeminist disciplining a woman seeking too much power. The attacks on Clinton illustrate the ways in which the pornification of political women can quickly degenerate into a violently misogynistic hatred of women.

(Sheeler & Anderson, 2013: 63)

Sheeler and Anderson conclude that the sexually exploitive nature of the coverage of Palin and Clinton in 2008 reveals the "persistence of cultural stereotypes about women political leaders . . . despite the progress evidenced by Clinton and Palin's candidacies" (2013: 88). That is, while the presence of women in the political sphere is considered an excellent social development, their successes are commonly eclipsed by the media coverage of these figures. This idea, while explored in different capacities, is suggested in all of the books reviewed, demonstrating the debilitating nature of such media coverage on women—whether or not they are working in politics.

The analyses and discussions provided in the books reviewed demonstrate similar themes pertaining to framing, with all three books illuminating the ways in which framing can impact the coverage of minority populations, specifically women. Specifically, all three books discuss the ways in which media depictions distort coverage of politics, whether to subjugate women or sensationalize events to emphasize favour or disfavour of a specific political party based on media ownership. Despite the varying perspectives discussed, it is clear that patriarchy is alive and well in the coverage of women in politics, and continues to threaten women's success and ability when working in this field. Media framing is central to this problem, as news reporting commonly fails to focus on the facts and information that are relevant to the coverage of political figures. Although our society is moving forward and demonstrating excellent advancements pertaining to the equal involvement of minorities, it is clear that media coverage continues to lack growth. Specifically, as women are welcomed into various facets of the workforce and society, they can face scrutiny from many angles. Thus, patriarchy is alive and well in the media, making the role of women in politics a continual mediation between their designated gender and their desired role as a leader in society.

About the Reviewer

Heather McIntosh is a Ph.D. student at the University of Ottawa's School of Translation and Interpretation. She holds both her B.A. and M.A. in communication and has participated in various extensive research projects involving the investigation of current trends in media studies, journalism, public relations, and communication technologies. Her current research examines the interplay between communication and translation studies to further explore the role of localization and cultural-specificity in cross-cultural communication contexts.

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